

# Is Civility Still Possible?

## What Americans Want in Public Leaders and Public Discourse

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## Introduction

The fear of factionalism and its potentially corrosive effect on democratic politics was a major concern for America's founding president, George Washington. Despite these apprehensions, political parties rose to prominence immediately following Washington's presidency. As early as the Adams-Jefferson contest of 1800, Americans have complained about the negative tone of political campaigns, where the candidates of one party essentially set out to destroy the other party. These problems of division and conflict have been with us from the beginning.

Our current situation, however, presents some unique challenges not faced by previous generations of Americans—measurably higher levels of partisan polarization, record levels of economic inequality, and massive changes in the ethnic, racial, and religious composition of the country. These unique markers of our current context make the quest to identify strategies to foster a more civil conversation about American public life whether from a perspective of one's faith or political beliefs, more urgent than ever.

### **A House Divided: How Polarized Are We?**

It is no secret that Americans today are divided, particularly along lines of race, religion, and partisanship. The recent shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo., has brought the nation's racial divisions into sharp focus. To take just one measure of the racial divide, non-white Americans are much less likely than white Americans to believe that the criminal justice system treats everyone equally. Before the Ferguson shooting, there was already a 15-point gap between the perceptions of white and non-white Americans concerning the racial fairness of the criminal justice system; after the shooting, this gap widened to 32 points.<sup>1</sup>

We are closely divided over the role of religion in society. Nearly half (46%) of Americans say they are more worried about government interfering with people's ability to freely practice their religion than they are about religious groups trying to pass laws that force their beliefs on others. An equal number (46%) of Americans have the opposite view; they express greater concern about religious groups forcing their beliefs on others. These concerns tend to fall along ideological lines, with conservatives harboring the former worry and liberals harboring the latter.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [Public Religion Research Institute, American Values Survey, September 2014.](#)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> [Public Religion Research Institute, LGBT Issues & Trends Survey, February 2014.](#)

Americans also hold diverging evaluations of the overall direction that American society and culture are heading. Close to half (46%) of Americans say that since the 1950s American culture and way of life have mostly changed for the worse, while nearly as many (44%) say the opposite.<sup>3</sup>

Increasing political polarization is a well-established fact in American politics. Elites, such as members of Congress, have become increasingly divided by party affiliation over the past four decades (McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal, 2006). Today, moderates have all but disappeared from Congress, with members now boasting clear and consistent ideological voting patterns. This growing polarization results in more legislative votes along strict party lines. Moreover, as the parties become more ideologically homogeneous there are lower levels of cooperation and comity between politicians from different sides of the aisle, as reflected in the gridlock currently ailing our political system.

There is also evidence that the American electorate has also become increasingly polarized. First documented in a groundbreaking article by Marc Hetherington (2001), further research by Alan Abramowitz (2014; Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008) shows that Americans who identify with one of the two major parties align their issue positions with their parties' preferred positions more strongly today than they did in the past. Other recent studies of polarization have found that the median Democrat and the median Republican are further apart today in their issue positions and ideological orientation than they were even a decade ago.<sup>4</sup>

A major recent study of four decades of congressional voting patterns confirms that over the last few decades, partisanship has overtaken other forces that previously mitigated its effects. For example, prior to the Reagan administration, on a range of issues, the religious affiliation of members of Congress rivaled or exceeded party affiliation as a predictor of legislative voting patterns. After the Reagan administration, party affiliation began to trump religious affiliation as a predictor of legislative votes. Related studies demonstrate that these same patterns hold among rank and file partisans. Among white Protestants and white Catholics, for instance, views on social issues such as abortion are now predicted more strongly by party affiliation than by religious affiliation, something that was less true prior to the 1980s (Cox & Jones, 2013).

Americans are well aware of the reality of partisan polarization. Around the time of the last mid-term election in 2010, nearly 6-in-10 (59 percent) Americans said they believe the country is more divided over politics today than it was in the past. Only 1-in-20 (5 percent) said the country is less divided over politics, while one-third (33 percent) said the political division today is about the same as in the past.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Pew Research Center, Political Polarization and Typology Survey, June 2014.

<sup>5</sup> [Public Religion Research Institute, PRRI/RNS Religion News Survey, November 2010.](#)

### **Exacerbating the Problem: Social Insularity and Segregation**

The divisions among the American populace present significant challenges for a democratic society. Previous theories have suggested that sustained contact with people of different backgrounds can serve to ameliorate tensions and feelings of distrust (Allport, 1954). As Putnam and Campbell concluded in *American Grace*, “having a religiously diverse social network leads to a more positive assessment of specific religious groups,” particularly those groups that tend to be viewed most negatively (Putnam & Campbell, 2010, p. 527).

However, more recent research casts doubt on the degree to which Americans congregate, socialize and interact with people who do not share their racial, ethnic or religious background. In their core social networks, Americans tend to include those people who are very similar to themselves. A 2013 survey conducted by Public Religion Research Institute found that among white Americans, 91% of the people in their core social networks are also white. And three-quarters (75%) of white Americans have no one in their core social network who is of a different race or ethnicity.<sup>6</sup>

Americans’ core social networks are also religiously homogeneous. The core social networks of white evangelical Protestants and white mainline Protestants are overwhelmingly composed of other Christians (87% and 78% respectively). The networks of Catholics are similarly homogeneous; 72% of the people comprising Catholics’ core social networks are also Catholic.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, although there has been some progress in desegregating churches, it remains largely true that “the most segregated hour of Christian America is eleven o’clock on Sunday morning,” as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. famously put it. A recent Duke University study found that mixed-race congregations have only increased marginally over the last 14 years, from seven percent in 1998 to 13% of congregations in 2012.<sup>8</sup>

### **What do Americans Want from Elected Leaders? Compromise vs. Standing on Principles**

As congressional gridlock has increased in recent years (Binder, 2014), American appreciation and appetite for compromise has also grown. Recent surveys have found that since 2010, more Americans are expressing support for political leaders who compromise to get things done. In 2010, less than half (47%) of the public said that it was more important for political leaders to compro-

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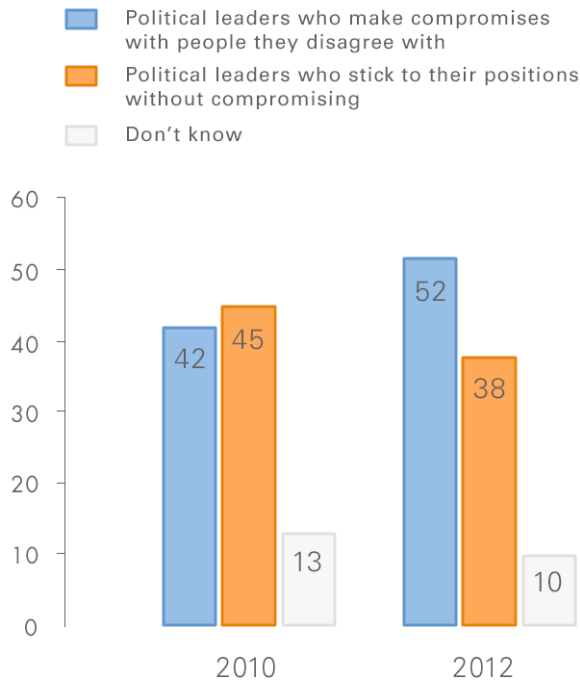
<sup>6</sup> [Public Religion Research Institute, American Values Survey, October 2013.](#)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Mixed-race congregations include those where no single racial or ethnic group represents more 80% of the members. Duke National Congregations Study, 1998-2012.

mise, while 27% said that it was more important for political leaders to stick to their beliefs even at the cost of governance—roughly one-quarter (24%) staked out a neutral position.<sup>9</sup> By 2013, Americans' preference for compromise had edged upward, with a majority (52%) saying they

### What type of political leader do you admire more?



Sources: Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, November 2010; United Technologies/National Journal Congressional Connection Poll, July 2012

prefer political leaders who compromise in order to get things done.<sup>10</sup>

Americans are also more apt to admire political leaders who make compromises than they were just a few years ago. In 2010, only 42% of the public said they admired political leaders who compromised, while 45% said they more admired those who stuck to their views without compromising.<sup>11</sup> In 2012, a majority (52%) of Americans said they admired political leaders who compromised over those who stuck to their positions.<sup>12</sup>

A preference for legislators who compromise is shared among Americans regardless of social, racial, or economic background. However, there are notable political divisions, with conservatives and Republicans expressing much more support for legislators who refuse to compromise. Only 38% of Republicans say it is more important for political leaders in Washington to compromise, a view supported by majorities of independents (53%) and Democrats (60%). Conservatives are also much less likely to prefer leaders who compromise (36%) than moderates (60%) and liberals (62%).<sup>13</sup> The partisan gap in preferences

is significant. For example, 62% of liberals and 60% of moderates prefer leaders who compromise, while only 36% of conservatives do so. Similarly, 60% of Democrats and 53% of independents prefer leaders who compromise, while only 38% of Republicans do so.

<sup>9</sup> Gallup Poll, November 2010. The original question asked respondents to place themselves on a five-point scale with "1" indicating a preference for compromise and "5" indicating a preference for leaders to stick to their beliefs. Consistent with how Gallup reports out its results to this question, this analysis collapsed the first and second categories and the fourth and fifth categories.

<sup>10</sup> Gallup Poll, October 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, November 2010.

<sup>12</sup> United Technologies and National Journal Congressional Connection Poll, July 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Gallup Poll, October 2013.



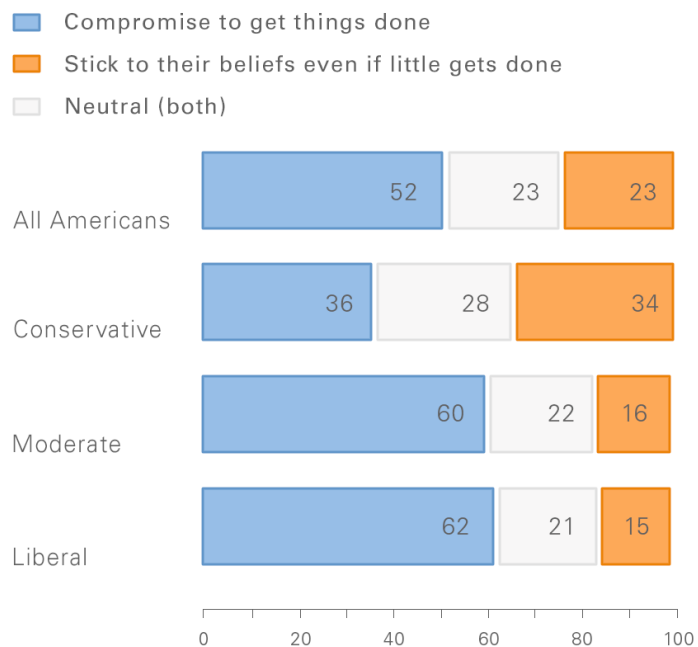
for leaders who compromise is not a recent development. The political differences in preferences for compromise are evident as far back as the late 1980s.<sup>14</sup>

Yet, Americans overall maintain a strong preference for leaders who are ready to work together. One reason why Americans prefer politicians who are willing to compromise is that they believe government runs better when they do. More than 6-in-10 (63%) Americans say that the country is governed better when more people in political office are willing to compromise. Only 30% say that the government runs worse when such people are in political office.<sup>15</sup>

### Overcoming Differences

Most Americans do not believe that America's political leaders work to overcome differences very well. In fact, only about 1-in-5 (21%) Americans say that political leaders work very or somewhat well to overcome differences, while nearly three-quarters (73%) say the opposite. In stark contrast, roughly two-thirds of the public say that people in their community (66%) and people in their church or congregation (64%) work to overcome differences either somewhat well or very well.<sup>16</sup>

**Compromise vs. Standing Firm on Principle**  
Percent who prefer leaders who...



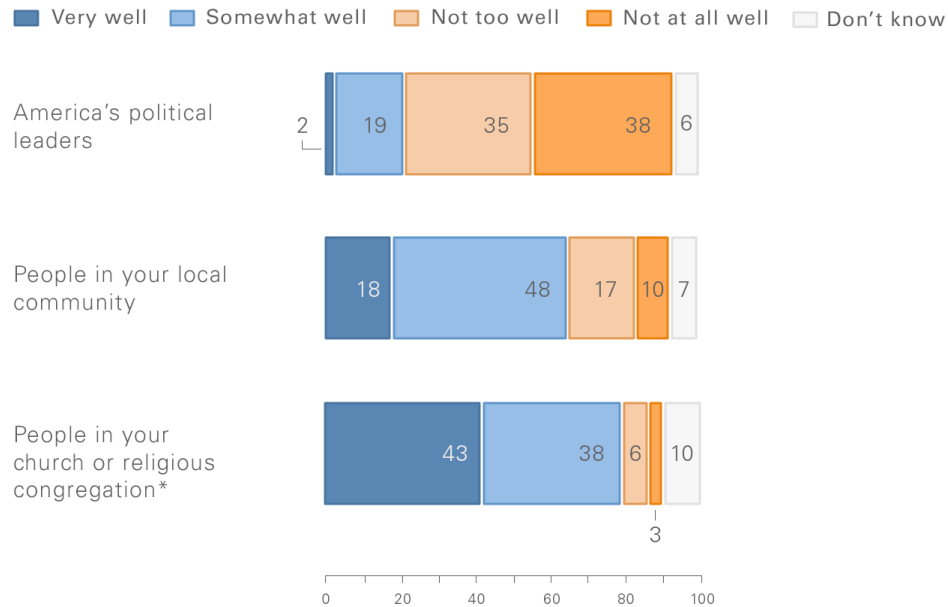
Source: Gallup Poll, October 2013

<sup>14</sup> Pew Research Center for the People & the Press. 2007. Broad Support for Political Compromise in Washington.

<sup>15</sup> Gallup Poll, July 2014.

<sup>16</sup> Public Religion Research Institute, PRRI/RNS Religion News Survey, November 2010.

## Ability of people to work together to overcome differences



\*Excludes those who said they don't attend religious services or belong to a congregation

Source: Public Religion Research Institute, PRRI/RNS Religion News Survey, November 2010

Public perceptions about political leaders are largely shared among Americans regardless of their background. However, Democrats (27%) maintain a somewhat more positive outlook about legislators' ability to work together than either independents (19%) or Republicans (19%).<sup>17</sup>

Despite giving political leaders poor marks for working together, Americans do not place all the blame on legislators themselves. When asked whether gridlock was primarily due to the growing distance between the two parties or the actions of a few members of Congress, Americans are more likely to blame the increasing polarization. Nearly half (48%) of Americans say that the inability of Congress to get things done is the result of the political parties moving too far apart while only 36% say that it is the result of intransigence among a handful of legislators.<sup>18</sup>

## Negativity and Civility in Political Campaigns

Most American voters believe that political campaigns can be conducted in an aggressive fashion that remains respectful, but a growing number of Americans also say the amount of negativity in campaigns is increasing.

<sup>17</sup> Public Religion Research Institute, PRRI/RNS Religion News Survey, November 2010.

<sup>18</sup> Pew Research Center for the People & the Press Survey, September 2013.

### **Are Civil Campaigns Possible?**

Most voters believe that campaigns that rely on aggressive positive messages are possible and that overly negative and nasty campaigning is avoidable. Nine-in-ten (90%) registered voters say it is possible for candidates to run for office in an aggressive but respectful way. Just seven percent of voters say nasty campaigns are unavoidable.<sup>19</sup>

Despite widespread agreement that civility is possible in political campaigns, and a voluminous amount of research showing that negative campaign messages are not any more effective (Lau, Sigelman, & Rovner, 2007), a growing number of Americans say recent elections have been noticeably more negative than past ones. About 4-in-10 (42%) Americans said the 2010 election was more negative than past elections, compared to about 1-in-5 (22%) who said the election was more positive. Approximately 3-in-10 (31%) said the tone of the 2010 election was no different than the tone in previous years.<sup>20</sup>

There were strong partisan divisions in perceptions of negativity. About half (51%) of Democrats and close to half (45%) of independents perceived the 2010 election as more negative than previous elections, while approximately one-quarter (26%) of Republicans felt the same way.<sup>21</sup>

This perception of increased negativity was also evident in the aftermath of the 2012 election. Nearly 7-in-10 (68%) voters said there was more mudslinging or negative campaigning in the 2012 election than in past presidential contests. In contrast, only about 1-in-5 (19%) voters said there was less negative campaigning in 2012, and approximately 1-in-10 (11%) said there was no change from previous presidential elections.<sup>22</sup>

In 2012, the partisan divisions were also strong, although the sentiment was reversed with Republican voters perceiving more negativity than Democratic voters. Almost three-quarters (73%) of Republican voters said there was more negative campaigning in the 2012 election compared to previous presidential elections, while about 6-in-10 (63%) Democratic voters expressed the same opinion. Nearly 7-in-10 (69%) independent voters also said the 2012 election had been more negative than past elections.<sup>23</sup>

Public perceptions about increasing negativity in electoral contests are not based on higher sensitivities to these types of campaign appeals, but a reflection of the rising frequency with which

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<sup>19</sup> SurveyUSA/Allegheny College/Indiana University – Purdue University Fort Wayne Poll, November 2010.

<sup>20</sup> Public Religion Research Institute, PRRI/RNS Religion News Survey, November 2010.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, Post-Election Survey, November 2012.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

these types of ads are used in American elections. According to an analysis conducted by the Wesleyan Media Project, negative advertising has increased over the past few election cycles. As of mid-September 2014, negative advertising had already surpassed the levels recorded in 2012 and 2010 (Wesleyan Media Project 2014).

### The Consequences of Negative Campaigns

Scholars have long debated what effect negative ads have on their intended audience, both immediate and more far-reaching. The conventional wisdom has generally held that negative ads serve as an effective tool for reducing an opponent's appeal and therefore boosting the electoral prospects of the sponsor, and at the same time reduce voters propensity to participate in elections. However, a comprehensive review of existing research shows that neither of these assumptions are supported by the evidence (Lau, Sigelman, Rovner 2007). The balance of evidence suggests that negative ads are neither effective ways of winning voters nor do they cause widespread voter apathy and political disaffection. And while this same study concluded that negative ads tend to be somewhat more memorable than positive ads, most research has shown that advertising effects are typically very short-lived (Gerber, Gimpel, Green, & Shaw, 2011).<sup>24</sup>

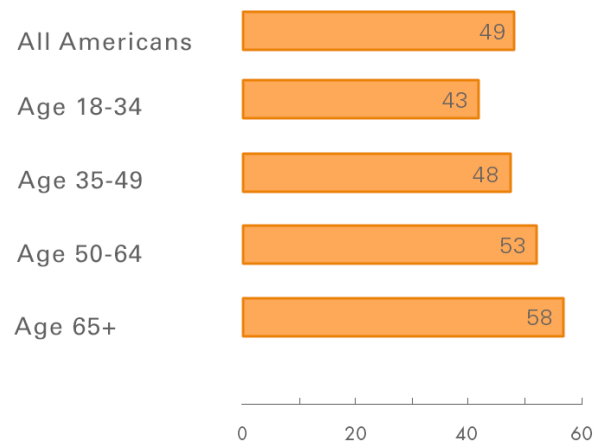
## Civility in American Politics and Public Discourse

### Civility in Public Discourse & Politics

Americans remain very concerned about the perceived lack of civil and respectful discourse in the political system. More than 8-in-10 Americans say this is a somewhat serious (32%) or very serious (49%) concern. This concern is also evident among Americans from a variety of different backgrounds.

### How serious of a problem is the lack of civil or respectful discourse in the political system?

Percent who say lack of civil or respectful discourse is a very serious problem



Source: Public Religion Research Institute, PRRI/RNS Religion News Survey, November 2010

<sup>24</sup> More recent work suggests negative campaign appeals may not affect all Americans in the same way. Fridkin and Kenney (2011) found that Americans with a low tolerance for negative attacks are most likely to become discouraged by such ads and to politically disengage. A recent survey lends support to the idea that negative campaigns may have a differential effect on voters, discouraging some voters from participating in the political process while convincing others to get more involved. The survey, from 2010, found that 3-in-10 (30%) registered voters said the tone of political campaigns makes them less interested in getting involved in elections, while nearly 4-in-10 (38%) said the tone of campaigns increased their interest in the campaign. Another 3-in-10 (30%) voters said the tone of campaigns has no effect on their involvement. SurveyUSA/Allegheny College/Indiana University – Purdue University Fort Wayne Poll, November 2010.

However, there are some notable differences in the degree to which some Americans express concern about the lack of civility.<sup>25</sup>

There are substantial generational differences in the degree to which Americans express concern about civility with older Americans expressing much greater concern than younger adults. Nearly 6-in-10 (58%) seniors (age 65 and older) say the lack of civil discourse in the political system is a very serious problem, a view shared by only about 4-in-10 (43%) younger adults (age 18 to 34).<sup>26</sup>

There are also modest political differences. Democrats (53%) and independents (51%) are more likely than Republicans (41%) to report that the lack of civility is a very serious problem. Interestingly, there are only modest differences in the degree of concern registered by various religious groups. A slim majority of white evangelical Protestants (51%) and religiously unaffiliated Americans (51%) say the lack of civil and respectful discourse is a very serious problem, while roughly half of white mainline Protestants (49%) and Catholics (47%) say the same. Among minority Protestants, 58% say the lack of respectful discourse is a very serious problem.<sup>27</sup>

On two of the most important public debates over the last five years—the debate over health care in 2009 and the federal budget in 2011—Americans were more likely to characterize the tone of the debate as rude and disrespectful than polite and respectful. In 2009, a majority (53%) of Americans said the tone of the debate surrounding the Affordable Care Act had been rude and disrespectful, while less than one-third (31%) described it as polite.<sup>28</sup> Sixteen percent offered no opinion. A few years later, nearly as many Americans (49%) characterized the ongoing debate over the federal budget and the deficit as rude and disrespectful. Only 27% said the tone of the discussion was generally civil, while about one-quarter (24%) offered no opinion about it.<sup>29</sup>

### **Sources of Incivility**

If there is broad agreement about the seriousness of the lack of civility in politics, Americans are of many different minds about who—or what—is responsible for the current state of affairs. In early 2011, Americans cited a number of different obstacles faced by political leaders who are trying to change the tone in Washington. Close to 1-in-5 (17%) Americans said cable news commentators were the biggest obstacle, followed by the Tea Party (15%), liberal bloggers (13%), and conservative talk radio (12%). Fewer than 1-in-10 Americans said that conservative religious lead-

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<sup>25</sup> Public Religion Research Institute, PRRI/RNS Religion News Survey, November 2010.

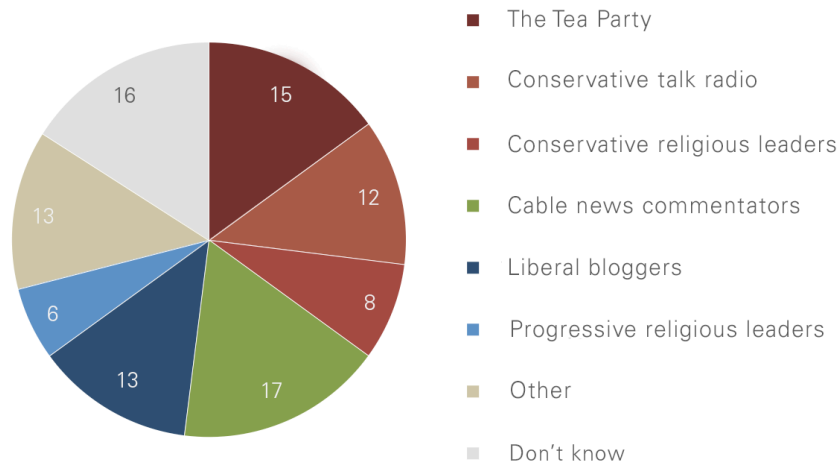
<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Pew Research Center, News Interest Index Poll, September 2009.

<sup>29</sup> Pew Research Center, News Interest Index Poll, March 2011.

What is the biggest obstacle for political leaders who want to change the tone in Washington and work across party lines?



Source: Public Religion Research Institute, PRRI/RNS Religion News Survey, January 2011

ers (8%) or progressive religious leaders (6%) presented the most significant obstacle to political leaders attempting to change the tone.<sup>30</sup>

Americans from different religious backgrounds also have diverging views about the people or institutions that are most responsible for hampering efforts to change the tone in Washington. Minority Protestants (25%), Catholics (17%), and white mainline Protestants (17%) are much more likely to blame the Tea Party than white evangelical Protestants (8%). Conversely, white evangelical Protestants are much more likely to say that liberal bloggers are the biggest obstacle to civility (23%). Similar numbers of religiously unaffiliated Americans blame conservative talk radio (19%) and cable news commentators (21%).<sup>31</sup>

There are also notable generational differences. Young adults (age 18 to 34) are roughly twice as likely as seniors (age 65 and older) to say cable news commentators are the biggest obstacle for political leaders working to establish a more civil tone (21% vs. 12%).<sup>32</sup>

These results comport with other recent research that has shown that the public spreads blame for increased incivility across multiple institutions and actors. Wolf, Strachan, and Shea (2012)

<sup>30</sup> [Public Religion Research Institute, PRRI/RNS Religion News Survey, January 2011.](#)

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid

found that Americans identified a number of different culprits responsible for the rise of incivility: political parties (70%), television news programs (61%), talk radio shows (61%) and changes in American culture (59%).

Television and particularly cable news is frequently cited as playing an outsized role in the growth of incivility in American public debate. Mutz (2007) found that oppositional nature of television news, which places a premium on creating drama and instigating conflict between political actors, encourages incivility and a type of “in-your-face” discourse. Mutz and Reeves (2005, p. 1) also noted that “televised presentations of political differences of opinions” frequently violate well-established social norms of interpersonal interactions. What might seem well out of bounds in a face-to-face encounter is quite common on many cable broadcasts. Further exacerbating the problem is the fracturing of the media landscape, which created environments that reward more strident viewpoints.

Incivility has also been found to occur frequently in online discussion forums. One recent study of online comments across several sections of a newspaper’s online edition calculated that as many as 1-in-5 (22%) public comments “contained some form of incivility” (Coe, Kenski, & Rains, 2014). The same study found that a majority (55%) of discussions about a particular article contained at least one or more comments characterized as uncivil and that uncivil comments were not limited to just a few commenters. However, the authors also concluded that incivility was highly contextual and varied considerably across topics. Articles that presented partisan cues or that included topics or issues with clearly defined sides generated a much greater degree of incivility than other types of articles.

### **The Great American Consensus: Issues that Unite Us**

It is true that on a variety of important social and political questions Americans remain at odds about the correct policy or course of action. However, on a number of important policies—including paid sick leave and family leave and the minimum wage—Americans overwhelmingly agree. These issues engender substantial support that crosses religious, political, and generational lines.

Today, nearly 7-in-10 (69%) Americans support increasing the minimum wage from \$7.25 an hour to \$10.10 an hour.<sup>33</sup> Support for raising the minimum wage has been quite robust, with support at roughly 7-in-10 since at least 2010.<sup>34</sup> On this issue, traditional fault-lines over economic policy are notably absent. For instance, there are no substantial differences by social class. Nearly 6-in-10

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<sup>33</sup> Public Religion Research Institute, American Values Survey, September 2014.

<sup>34</sup> In 2010, 67% of the public expressed support for raising the minimum wage to \$10.00 an hour. [Public Religion Research Institute, American Values Survey, October 2010](#).

(58%) white collegeeducated Americans and roughly two-thirds (66%) of white working-class Americans favor this policy. There is also a consensus among political groups despite differences in the intensity of support. A majority of political conservatives (54%) and even larger majorities of moderates (74%) and liberals (88%) also favor an increase in the minimum wage.<sup>35</sup>

On the issue of paid sick leave and paid parental leave, support is even more overwhelming. More than 8-in-10 (81%) Americans favor requiring companies to provide all full-time employees with paid sick days if they or an immediate family member gets sick. Similarly, about 8-in-10 (78%) Americans support requiring companies to provide all full-time employees with paid leave for the birth or adoption of a child. Support for these policies crosses virtually every demographic, political and religious boundary.<sup>36</sup>

### **Can Religious Communities Serve as Spaces for Civil Dialogue?**

A wealth of social science research has shown that participation in a religious community provides opportunities for the acquisition of social and civic skills and promotes greater civic engagement (Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995). However, religious communities face obstacles in their efforts to bring people together across lines of division. First, as noted above, congregations are largely still racially segregated. Moreover, churches have also experienced their own ideological polarization, with conservative Presbyterians for example now perceiving themselves to have more in common with conservative Catholics than with their fellow Presbyterians who are more liberal. Second, confidence in religious institutions is at an all time low. Fewer than half (44%) of Americans say they have a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in church or organized religion, a drop from 60% in 2001.<sup>37</sup> The problem is particularly acute among younger adults, many of whom believe that religion and religious bodies are as likely to initiate conflict as they are to resolve it. More than 4-in-10 (43%) young adults (age 18 to 29) believe that religion causes more problems in society than it solves, compared to only 26% of seniors (age 65 and older).<sup>38</sup>

There are also substantial disagreements about the virtues of religious institutions between religious Americans generally and the growing number of religiously unaffiliated Americans, who now account for roughly 1-in-5 Americans. More than 7-in-10 (71%) religiously unaffiliated Americans believe that religion causes more problems than it solves. Strong majorities of Americans across every other faith tradition disagree.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Public Religion Research Institute, American Values Survey, September 2014.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Gallup Poll, June 2001. Gallup Poll, June 2012.

<sup>38</sup> Public Religion Research Institute, American Values Survey, October 2013.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.



## Conclusion

On many of the major policy questions of the day, Americans are genuinely divided. At the same time, there are notable exceptions that confound simple depictions of an American public that is irrevocably fractured into competing factions. On basic workplace and economic policy issues such as paid parental leave, paid sick days, and increasing the minimum wage, there is overwhelming agreement among the public. Yet, these consensus issues are routinely ignored by both policymakers and the media.

It is also clear that despite being divided by generation, by religion, by race, and by political party allegiances, Americans express a strong preference for compromise. Moreover, the public appetite for compromise is growing. Political leaders who are willing compromise to get things done are admired substantially more than those who stick to their positions.

The path toward greater civility and respect in civil discourse is somewhat complicated due to our collective tendency to associate with people whose views, values and experiences we share. Despite growing diversity, Americans continue to associate, socialize, and congregate largely with people who share the same background. Religious institutions, which are in many ways naturally suited to foster dialogue, are also hampered in their efforts because congregations continue to be segregated along racial and even ideological lines. Religious bodies must also navigate the declining levels of trust in civic institutions, particularly among young adults. When religious leaders focus on divisive issues, Americans are more likely to perceive them as part of the problem rather than as a potential solution.

The 21st century media landscape is also creating challenges for civil discourse. More and more, our country's polarized media outlets reward extreme rhetoric with political discussion that often aims to create conflict and drama at the expense of moderation. On the digital side, incivility in online discussion forums is quite common and is not limited to just a few commenters.

Despite these divisions and barriers, Americans remain deeply concerned about the rising levels of incivility in American politics and elections. The overwhelming majority of the public believes that the lack of civil discourse is a major problem for the functioning of our political system.

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